



Shifting Visual Perspectives - Thesis Proposal by Daniel Nelson

Introduction:

What don't we see? Naturally our visual perception is filtered by the properties of our eyes and the location of our bodies—secured firmly to the ground, perceiving only visible light, and seeing about a 95° field of view. Yet, we also live in an age of fantastically-aided perception—where we look down on cloud tops from planes, use x-rays to see fractured bones, and project ourselves into deep space with telescopes. We accept these modes of seeing on a daily basis, and to a degree, we have normalized them. But what about perspectives above our eye level, yet well below where planes can fly safely? What lies between the up close pictures of flowers and the truly microscopic? And what do x-rays of non-human subjects reveal? In my project I propose to investigate these sorts of “middle perspectives” that, to a large degree, remain our perceptual voids.

Consider the images above. From left to right they show a temporal light sculpture,¹ an insect x-ray,² a digitally-reconstructed elephant embryo,³ a spider's spinners,⁴ a Japanese storm drain,⁵ and a geothermal lake as seen from the air.⁶ All are very real visual realities, yet none can be accessed without dramatically shifting away from our default modes of perception.

Project Concept:

Through a series of image creations, I propose to explore four key disruptions in visual perspective. (1) *Position in space*: What do we see when we look from above and below the five or six feet from which we usually view our environments? What happens when we examine spaces that we are not usually interested in or permitted to visit (i.e. I have never actually seen where or how my garbage is processed)? (2) *Space in time*: What can we discover by freezing time beyond our natural ability, or by allowing it to occupy a duration of time beyond our momentary perception? On another level, what can we find in familiar locations at times when we wouldn't ordinarily be present? (3) *Filters*: How do familiar subjects appear in ranges of light outside the visible spectrum or through distorted optics? Can filters be applied as forceful changes upon an object (e.g. burning, drying, or slicing layers off layers to view unfamiliar states)? (4) *Scale*: Naturally, we view scale relative to the size of our own bodies. What perspective shifts occur when we shrink the size of our optics to fit inside tiny spaces?

Research Strategy:

For each variable, I will research related conceptual, creative, and scientific works. This will inform an array of project-based visual explorations where I will apply my background in photography and visual arts to reveal and document unfamiliar ways of seeing. For example, to explore scale I might pursue collaboration with a microbiologist, while for filters I might photograph 1,000 cross sections of a branch and compile them so a viewer could interactively navigate through the depth of the wood. Through the duration of the project, I will keep a journal and interactive blog. These will serve as a catalyst for digesting ideas, brainstorming projects, and documenting the experience. Hopefully they will also serve as a springboard for initiating dynamic interdisciplinary collaborations. By the end of the project I will present at least four polished visual works (one for each variable of perspective) and a written synopsis of my experience and findings. My budget will be divided primarily between technology, travel, and presentation media.

Why this matters:

As I set off on this journey, I am grateful to many others who are already wrestling with perceptual voids for their own reasons. X-ray photographer Nick Veasey uses his images to confront our societal obsession with external appearances by peeling away layers to reveal what is underneath. Not so differently, Yann Arthus-Bertrand has made hundreds of thousands of low level aerial photographs and exposed a new understanding of human geography and our race's impact on the Earth's natural systems. Others, like photomicrographer Dennis Knukle, view their achievements primarily as useful scientific resources.

While I am open to these sorts of specific outcomes, my focus is more fundamental. On a basic level, I intend to challenge our silent assumption that “If I don't see something, it's not there.” Most often, I believe we simply are not aware that our perspectives are entrenched in familiarity. In a small way, I am trying to knock down these doors for myself and for others. In doing this, my intent is not to just continue extending the reach of our aided perspectives. Rather, my hope is that by introducing dramatically unfamiliar ways of seeing, we might collectively be jolted into engaging our environments with a fresh sense of wonder and curiosity.

¹ Light drawing by Eric Staller - <http://ericstaller.com/>

² X-Ray by Nick Veasey - <http://www.nickveasey.com/>

³ Elephant embryo from 3D ultrasound by the National Geographic Channel - <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/>

⁴ Spider spinners photomicrograph by UW alumnus Dennis Knukle - <http://www.denniskunkel.com/>

⁵ Storm drain in Kasukabe, Japan by unknown photographer. Info from: <http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20060207a5.html>

⁶ Yellowstone from the air by Yann Arthus-Bertrand - <http://www.yannarthusbertrand.org/>